

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
SS-15 USIA-06 SSM-03 IO-13 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /086 W
-----124167 100505Z /23

R 091504Z DEC 77

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5920
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 7558

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PGOV, SY, PLO, EG, XF
SUBJECT: FRENCH INTERPRETATION OF SYRIAN/PLO VIEWS TOWARD RECENT
DEVELOPMENTS

1. ON DECEMBER 9 FRENCH POLOFF GAVE US SOME BACKGROUND ON
RECENT FRENCH CONVERSATIONS WITH PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL
ADVISOR DAOUDY, SOME SECOND ECHELON SYRIAN BAATHI OFFICIALS
AND SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE PALESTINE CENTRAL COUNCIL. MAIN
POINTS ARE SUMMARIZED BELOW.

2. DAOUDY: AFTER RETURNING FROM TRIPOLI DAOUDY TOLD FRENCH
AMBASSADOR THAT HE WAS VERY PLEASED WITH THE RESULTS OF THE
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CONFERENCE. HE ASSERTED THAT SYRIA HAD HELD ITS POSITION
DESPITE HEAVY PRESSURE TO OPT OUT OF THE NEGOTIATING
PROCESS. THE IRAQIS HAD BEEN ISOLATED, AND SYRIA HAD
WON LIBYAN AND ALGERIAN BACKING FOR ITS POSITION.
DAOUDY EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE THAT JORDAN WOULD NOT JOIN
CAIRO TALKS.

3. BAATHIST OFFICIALS: DURING BARRE'S VISIT HERE FRENCH JOURNALISTS WHO HAD MET WITH NUMBER OF MID-LEVEL BAATHI FUNCTIONARIES WERE STRUCK BY THEIR BELIEF THAT SYRIA WAS GOING TO TRIPOLI TO JOIN THE REJECTION FRONT. MOST SEEMED BUOYED AND HAPPY AT THIS PROSPECT. FRENCH POLOFF CONJECTURED THAT THEY WERE NOT LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN PRIVY TO ASSAD'S THINKING AND THEIR UNCONCEALED JOY AT THE PROSPECT OF SYRIA'S OPTING OUT OF NEGOTIATIONS INDICATED MANY OF THEM WERE STILL DOCTRINAIRE IN THEIR THINKING AND WERE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH SYRIA'S COMMITMENT TO A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT.

4. SYRIAN PUBLIC REACTION: FRENCH READING WAS THAT MANY SYRIANS, ESPECIALLY CHRISTIANS AND BUSINESSMEN, WERE TAKING A WAIT-AND-SEE ATTITUDE. SOME WERE SKEPTICAL THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVE WOULD PRODUCE POSITIVE RESULTS FOR ANYONE BUT EGYPTIANS. NEVERTHELESS, MANY OF THEM FELT THAT REGIME HAD OVERREACTED TO SADAT'S MOVES. FRENCH ALSO BELIEVED THAT SOME OF THE GUARDED PRO-SADAT REACTION AMONG UPPER-CLASS DAMASCENE SUNNIS STEMMED FROM THEIR RESENTMENT OF AN ALAWITE-DOMINATED GOVERNMENT. FRENCH READING OF SYRIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON BALANCE SOMEWHAT MORE SUPPORTIVE OF ASSAD'S ANTI-SADAT POSITION THAN OUR OWN READING.

5. PLO OFFICIALS: FRENCH POLOFF HAD TALKED WITH SEVERAL SECOND ECHELON PLO OFFICIALS (UNNAMED) WHO WERE MEMBERS
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OF THE PALESTINE CENTRAL COUNCIL DURING THE TRIPOLI CONFERENCE. ONE OF THEM, HE SAID, HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN MUCH HIGHER IN THE PLO HIERARCHY. IN SEPARATE CONVERSATIONS, THEY TOLD HIM THAT SOME WITHIN THE PLO BELIEVED IT WAS A MISTAKE NOT TO HAVE ACCEPTED THE INVITATION TO ATTEND THE CAIRO CONFERENCE. THEY SAW AN OPPORTUNITY TO FORCE THE ISSUE OF THEIR RECOGNITION AND RESTRAIN SADAT IF THEY ACTUALLY MANAGED TO GET INSIDE THE CONFERENCE ROOM. HOWEVER, MAJORITY VIEW WAS THAT ANY SUCH MOVE WOULD LEAD TO A DISASTROUS CONFRONTATION WITH SYRIA AND BADLY SPLIT THE PLO. NEITHER OF THESE MEN WERE SUPPORTERS OF ARAFAT OR PARTICULARLY DOVISH ACCORDING TO FRENCH EMBOFF, YET BOTH EXPRESSED SOME UNDERSTANDING FOR SADAT'S MOVE. THEY NOTED THAT PLO, ITSELF, HAD HELD DIRECT CONTACTS IN EUROPE WITH ISRAELIS AND THEY WERE WILLING TO WITHHOLD FINAL JUDGMENT ON SADAT UNTIL THE RESULTS OF THE CAIRO CONFERENCE WERE KNOWN. BOTH EXPRESSED OPINION THAT MODERATE WING OF PLO WAS MUCH LESS OPPOSED TO SADAT'S INITIATIVES THAN WERE THE SYRIANS. WHILE MOST PLO MODERATES SAW THE NEED TO GO ALONG WITH SYRIA FOR NOW, THEY WANTED TO LEAVE OPEN THE POSSIBILITY OF MANEUVER BETWEEN EGYPT AND SYRIA.

6. FRENCH EMBASSY VIEW: FRENCH EMBOFF EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT US POSITION WAS WEAKENING TOWARD THE GENEVA CONFERENCE; A MOVE HE FORESAW AS LIKELY TO FORCE SYRIA TO MOVE CLOSER TO THE SOVIETS. FROM HIS TALKS WITH SYRIAN OFFICIALS HE NOTED THAT MOST BELIEVED US WAS SOMEHOW BEHIND MUCH OF WHAT HAD TRANSPIRED. YET, HE FELT THAT SYRIAN MEDIA HAD TO DATE WITHHELD ITS FIRE AND WOULD CONTINUE TO DO SO UNTIL AFTER THE SECRETARY'S VISIT. IF THE VISIT WAS NOT REASSURING TO THE SYRIANS, HE EXPECTED THE PRESS TO BE UNLEASHED.

7. COMMENT: FRENCH EMBOFF'S REMARKS ABOUT BAATHI OFFICIALS' VIEWS LEND FURTHER CREDENCE TO OUR ASSUMPTION THAT THE PARTY HARBORS A NUMBER OF IDEALOGUES WHO NOT REALLY HAPPY
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WITH DIRECTION OF SYRIAN POLICY IN RECENT YEARS AND ARE HOPING FOR DEVELOPMENTS TO FORCE LEFTWARD REORIENTATION OF ASSAD'S POLICY.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: n/a
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 09-Dec-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977DAMASC07558
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770460-0009
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19771274/aaaackwd.tel
Line Count: 140
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 6aa42308-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 23-Nov-2004 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 298178
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: FRENCH INTERPRETATION OF SYRIAN/PLO VIEWS TOWARD RECENT DEVELOPMENTS
TAGS: PGOV, PLOS, SY, EG, XF, PLO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/6aa42308-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009